*Early Modern German Philosophy (1690–1750)*

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*Meiner Mutter gewidmet*

“Learnedness is propagated, imperceptibly but with great advantage, when someone can read all that is required to furnish a prudent intelligence in the language of his own country and does not first have to become frustrated through learning foreign tongues.”

—Christian Thomasius, *Welcher Gestalt man denen Frantzosen in gemeinen Leben und Wandel nachahmen solle?* [*In what way should one imitate the French in ordinary life and affairs?*]

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Timeline of Important Events in Germany, ca. 1690–1750

*1688* *April 29* Beginning of the reign of Friedrich III, Elector of Brandenburg

*1691* Christian Thomasius publishes *Introduction to the Doctrine of Reason*, the first

university textbook written in German

*1694 May 14* Inauguration of the university (Friedrichs-Universität) in Halle, with

Thomasius among the founding faculty

*1695* *Spring* Foundation of the orphanage in Halle by August Hermann Francke

*1700* *July 11* Establishment of the *Kurfürstlich-Brandenburgische Sozietät der*

*Wissenschaften* by Elector Friedrich III, with Leibniz named as president

*1701* *January 18* Friedrich III, Elector of Brandenburg crowned Friedrich I, King in Prussia

*1706* *September* Swedish forces under Charles XII invade Saxony and occupy Leipzig

*1707 January* Christian Wolff begins lecturing in Halle

*1713 February 25* Friedrich I dies, is succeeded by his son Friedrich Wilhelm I

*1716 November 14* Death of Leibniz

*1721 July 12* Wolff delivers his rectoral address “On the practical philosophy of the

Chinese”

*1723 November 8* Friedrich Wilhelm I orders Wolff’s exile from Prussia; the order is received in

Halle on 12 November and Wolff is given 48 hours to depart, ultimately taking up a position at the university (Philipps-Universität) in Marburg

*1724 April 22* Birth of Immanuel Kant

*1728 September 23* Death of Thomasius

*1734 October 14* Lectures begin at the new Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (which is

formally inaugurated in 1737)

*1740 May 31* Friedrich Wilhelm I dies, is succeeded by his son Friedrich II ( “the Great”)

*November 24* Friedrich II travels through Quedlinburg during his inaugural tour; Dorothea Christiane Leporin (Erxleben) is granted an audience with him

*December 6*  Wolff returns to a position in Halle, on the invitation of Friedrich II

*December 16* Friedrich II invades Silesia (in present-day Poland), marking the beginning of

the first Silesian war with Austria

*1742 June 11* Treaty of Berlin signed; end of first Silesian war

*1754 April 9* Death of Wolff

*May 6* Erxleben is examined for her medical doctorate, which is subsequently awarded to her

*June* 16–17 Friedrich II visits Halle and meets with professors from the university (including G. F. Meier)

Introduction

In many ways, the German-speaking lands of Europe, grouped together in the loose federation of states, cities, and still smaller entities known collectively as the Holy Roman Empire,[[1]](#footnote-1) stand apart from their British and European counterparts at the outset of the early Modern period. The devastating Thirty Years War (1618–48), a pan-European conflict that took place largely on German soil, imposed lasting and disproportionate costs on its population and economy. Indeed, in contrast with, for instance, Anglican England and Catholic France, the religious schism between Catholics and Protestants that had provided the original pretext for the war continued to divide the German lands into Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist states. This had the effect of fragmenting the intellectual climate, as the agenda for academic inquiry was set by the confession of the regional potentate and enforced by state censors. Outside of the universities, there was little in the way of the independent institutions—the learned societies and journals—that contributed so much to setting and driving the intellectual debate elsewhere, while most German universities themselves, including a clutch of respected Medieval universities, bent their resources to churning out scholastic textbooks and advancing their own spiritual cause. And where the rest of Britain and Europe had completed their turn to the vernacular as the preferred mode of learned expression, German remained unestablished as a literary language, and even into the 1680s professors had yet to lecture, much less publish, in their mother-tongue as Latin remained the language of scholarly discourse.

Yet, this would all change beginning around 1690 as a result of a number of intellectual developments that contributed to the establishment of a distinctively modern, German philosophical scene. Of course, the singular Leibniz, without question the foremost German philosopher of the early Modern period, had contributed enormously to this through his (relatively few) publications on philosophy and mathematics, but also through his successful advocacy for a German academy to rival the famous *Académie française* and Royal Society, and his staunch support of forward-thinking countrymen for university positions. Germany likewise saw the founding of learned journals, including the *Acta eruditorum* in 1682 and the first, if short-lived, German-language periodical published beginning in 1688 by Christian Thomasius, who would also become the first professor to lecture and publish in German. These developments were followed by the founding of the first modern university, the Friedrichs-Universität in Halle in 1694, which situated itself at the cutting-edge with its recruitment of Thomasius and, later, Christian Wolff, among other innovators, to faculty positions. The university in Halle would also prove the site of Germany’s first major intellectual controversy, namely, the dispute between Wolff and his Pietist colleagues in the theology faculty, a debate that had the effect of setting before the German literate public the full menu of the most contentious modern debates, including the conflict of faith and reason, the challenge of Spinozism, the antinomy between freedom and necessity, as well as the *libertas philosophandi*. The outcome of the controversy did not initially bode well for modern Germany’s nascent intellectual scene, as Wolff was removed from his position and hastily exiled from Prussia, yet these acts had the unintended effect of advertising his cause and turning him into an international celebrity. The subsequent assent of the Wolffian philosophy and its successful propagation through German universities led to a significant realignment within the German academy, with traditionalists now opposed to the modern (Wolffian) philosophy. In addition, and beyond the universities in the more tolerant urban centres such as Berlin and Hamburg, clandestine philosophical texts were authored and transmitted, further linking learned Germans to the current of radical ideas flowing throughout Britain and Europe.

Given this, it will not come as a surprise that German philosophers during this time directly engaged with many of the most important issues that occupied their counterparts in, for instance, England, France, and Holland. While it cannot be denied that some opted to devote their efforts to exploring the minutiae of the so-called “Leibnizian-Wolffian” philosophy, others focused their efforts on contributing to issues of broader significance for the early Modern period, and it is by way of showcasing these that the following texts have been selected. For the purposes of introducing these texts and underlining their relevance for our understanding of the history of Modern philosophy, I will consider four broader issues of acknowledged importance in this period and briefly outline the ways in which philosophers such as Thomasius and Wolff, and a number of others besides, not only engage with them but also advance their discussion in philosophically interesting and innovative ways.

1. Truth and Prejudice

A number of German thinkers in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century produced logic texts that were thoroughly modern in their rejection of the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition. This included works within the broadly Cartesian tradition, which continued to be influential in the philosophical and medical faculties in German universities. Most notable among these are texts by Johannes Clauberg (1622–65) and Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708). Like their contemporaries outside of Germany, including Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, Nicolas Malebranche, and John Locke, these theorists tended to view logic as an *organon* for the sciences (whether metaphysical or natural) and, given its unsuitability for the purpose, rejected the syllogism as an ineffective tool for scientific discovery in favour of new methods. Additionally, inasmuch as the task of logic was not merely the ordering and justification of truths but the generation and preservation of certainty or conviction, significant attention was paid to the psychological activities and faculties on the part of the subject.

These same features can be found in Christian Thomasius’ logic, as put forward in his *Introduction to the Doctrine of Reason* of 1691. However, Thomasius’ logic is particularly notable for its departures from and criticisms of the Cartesian tradition, in spite of his numerous (and unacknowledged) borrowings from it. So, in contrast to the scientific orientation of many Cartesian logics, Thomasius contends that the aim of logic is to train the natural light of the mind for the attainment of learnedness, which is also understood in practical terms, namely, as the improvement of the understanding *and* the will. Moreover, Thomasius is clear in distinguishing the natural light from the supernatural light, thereby emphasizing logic’s concern with this-worldly affairs, in contrast with theology’s authority in supernatural matters. This latter is consistent with Thomasius’ ambition, reflected in the fact that he published the work in German, to make the sort of training effected in logic more widely available outside of the schools.

Thomasius’ departure from the Cartesian tradition is also clearly evident in the theory of the mind, the doctrine of truth, and the account of prejudice he outlines in the *Doctrine of Reason*. So, he provides a capsule account of the faculties of the mind, distinguishing thought, as an internal discourse, from external sensation on the one hand which yields the images that constitute the object of thoughts, and on the other from internal sensation which amounts to our apprehension of our thinking and which Thomasius contends is or results in consciousness. Significantly, Thomasius objects to Descartes’ conception of the intellect as purely passive in contrast with the active will, claiming that both the faculty of thought, or the understanding, and the will can be active as well as passive. This activity on the part of the understanding informs Thomasius’ account of truth, which he takes to consist in the agreement of thoughts with things outside of our thoughts. While this initially seems to be little more than the familiar account of truth in terms of correspondence, Thomasius proceeds to contend that truth can consist not only in the agreement of our thoughts with things but also of our things with thoughts. This introduces a conception of truth as resulting from the mind’s imposition of an order on things through activities and principles native to it, rather than as simply consisting in the passive reception of information from without. This conception of truth as founded in the activity of the understanding is taken up by later thinkers in the Thomasian tradition, and most notably by Christian August Crusius in his account of the essence or nature of the understanding. A final innovative feature of Thomasius’ logic is his account of prejudice presented in the final chapter. Thomasius’ empiricism leads him away from the Cartesian account of prejudice as consisting in an over-reliance upon the senses, but his ultimate identification of precipitancy and reliance on authority as two principle prejudices bears a direct comparison to Bacon’s discussion of the four idols in the *New Organon*.

In addition to its importance for (what would come to be called) the Thomasian-Pietist tradition, Thomasius’ logic notably provided a crucial point of departure for Dorothea Christiane Erxleben’s later exposure of and attack on the prejudices obstructing women’s access to education. In her *Rigorous Investigation of the Causes that obstruct the Female Sex from Study* of 1742, Erxleben adopts Thomasius’ conception of learnedness as the aim of study, contending quite consistently with Thomasius’ intentions that this is a form of wisdom attainable by all regardless of gender. Moreover, Erxleben quite explicitly draws on Thomasius’ account of prejudice in her thorough criticism of the prejudice that women are unsuited to education. However, in contrast to Thomasius, who emphasized the removal of prejudice and purification of the understanding as a key *result* of study, Erxleben identifies the claim that women are unsuited for learning as a prejudice that is in a number of respects only reinforced by study (as evident through the learned men who have maintained the contrary); moreover, whereas Thomasius’ emphasis is on the harm caused by prejudice to one’s own understanding and will, Erxleben emphasizes the noxious effects on others, particularly women, that can result. Significantly, Erxleben’s criticism of the arguments offered in support of this prejudice draws on, and bears comparison to, other arguments and texts in the history of feminism, including those by Christine de Pizan (1364–1430), Marie de Gournay (1565–1645), and Anna Maria von Schurman (1607–78); yet, that she should identify these arguments as the products of an underlying prejudice constitutes her original and influential contribution to the ongoing *querelle des femmes*.

2. Radical Philosophy

Throughout the early Modern period, and continuing through to Kant, German philosophy was very much an academic affair. In spite of the proliferation of periodicals intended for a broader literate audience and the advent of learned societies and other institutions, philosophical debate and discussion tended to be engaged by professors with the most influential publications being textbooks intended for use in classrooms (as was widely required). The university, with its ties to its regional patron and frequently a broader religious agenda, had a moderating effect on the thought that emerged from it. Even so, outside of the university a tradition of radical philosophical thinking flourished in Germany between 1680 and 1750, which tradition drew variously on Hobbes, Gassendi, Spinoza, and others in, for instance, advancing mortalist views of the soul, rejecting the divine origin of Scripture, and challenging the institutions of contemporary political and clerical authority. While radical philosophical networks spanned Europe, Brandenburg-Prussia was a particularly active scene for the circulation of clandestine literature. This fact is accounted for, at least in part, by the comparatively tolerant attitude of the ruling (Calvinist) Hohenzollerns who welcomed groups from other nations who had been persecuted for their non-conformist ideas, most famously inviting the Huguenots who fled France in 1685 in the wake of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes to take up residence in their lands.

Berlin in particular, as the home to a number of well-connected nobles and with its frequent diplomatic traffic, became an important center for the exchange of radical ideas. The Socinian underground in Berlin provided the milieu for Friedrich Wilhelm Stosch’s *The Concord of Reason and Faith* of 1692, the first significant clandestine work produced by a German author. Stosch’s *Concord* bears the classic hallmarks of a Socinian treatise in subjecting all claims of faith to the standard of reason, and its rejection of the natural immortality of the soul and the doctrine of eternal punishment. Moreover, in making this case, Stosch draws on the works of Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736), a theologian suspected of Socinianism who was a friend of Locke’s and who published the first French summary of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. While Stosch also makes a number of waves in Spinoza’s direction, affirming that God for instance is the sole and unique substance, these ultimately amount to flourishes and betray little by way of any deeper commitment to Spinozistic thought. Instead, Stosch draws more deeply from Gassendi in framing his materialist account of the soul and even from Malebranche in rejecting any but an obscure grasp of thought and consciousness. Significantly, while Stosch’s initial account of thought seems to be crudely materialistic, he ultimately elaborates what amounts to an Aristotelian conception of the soul, in accordance with which it is identified with a principle of organization of the body. This culminates in Stosch’s comparison of the soul with a mill, identifying thought as one of its various effects, a comparison that was later targeted by Leibniz in the “Monadology” (who was familiar with Stosch through the Berlin court).

Brandenburg-Prussia’s reputation for toleration would be sorely tested by Theodor Ludwig Lau, a native of Königsberg educated in Halle. Like Stosch’s *Concord*, Lau’s *Philosophical Meditations on God, the World, and the Human Being* of 1717 was a widely circulated piece of clandestine literature in spite of a limited printing (and subsequent destruction of many of those copies), and Lau similarly defends a materialist conception of the soul, distinguishing between active and passive matter, with the former producing thought. However, in contrast with Stosch, Lau is working within a broadly pantheistic tradition, one in which the influence of Spinoza can be distinctly recognized but also, and perhaps more significantly, that of the Irish freethinker John Toland (1670–1722). Consistent with the latter, Lau frames his *Meditations* as a presentation of a universal religion, one for which the manifest character of God’s existence and providence, and the emphasis on internal sincerity, makes the recourse to theologians and the mediation of the Church utterly unnecessary for and even harmful to true piety. In addition to this rejection of clerical authority Lau offers a genealogical critique of the authority of the state, drawing upon the Hobbesian conception of a state of nature, a state which Lau conceives of as a condition of unfettered freedom and one which, in spite of its amorality, is offered as an instructive contrast to the condition of slavery that is reinforced by contemporary political, social, and religious institutions. In these distinctive ways, then, both Stosch and Lau make important and original contributions to radical thinking in the early 18th century.

3. The Controversy between Wolff and the Pietists

No history of German philosophy in the early Modern period can overlook the importance of Leibniz, not only for supplying the elements for the most influential philosophical system in Germany before Kant’s but also for his tireless efforts on behalf of modernizing German academic and intellectual institutions. Leibniz’s reputation had been harmed by the bitter priority dispute with Newton over the invention of the calculus, yet he continued to find a largely sympathetic audience within Germany, where his decisive influence on the broader philosophical agenda was out of all proportion with the few philosophical works he had published or which were otherwise available in the early 1700s. That this was so is to no small extent due to Christian Wolff, who came to Leibniz’s attention as a talented mathematician and with whom Leibniz corresponded for the last decade or so of his life. Wolff would later appropriate key planks of Leibniz’s metaphysics and epistemology, from sources including the exchange with Bayle concerning the pre-established harmony, the essays on substance and power published in the *Acta eruditorum*, as well as the correspondence with Clarke, to serve as the core of what would come to be called (in spite of Wolff’s protest) the “Leibnizian-Wolffian” philosophy. This system was first elaborated in Wolff’s *Rational Thoughts concerning God, the World, and the Human Soul and also all Things in general* (or the *German Metaphysics*) published in December 1719 (but printed with a publication year of 1720).

The Leibnizian-Wolffian system included a number of doctrines that spurred German philosophical debate in the early Modern period. Perhaps the best known is debate concerning the pre-established harmony, according to which the observed agreement of states between the soul and the body is explained through two independent orders of states grounded within each substance, the correspondence between which God ensures in advance of His act of making this world actual. Wolff himself qualified his commitment to Leibniz’s harmony, both taken as a hypothesis in cosmology (as a theory about the ground for the agreement between all substances in the world) and as a theory in psychology (concerning the agreement between the soul and body specifically), though he did view it as preferable to the influxionist and occasionalist alternatives. In addition, and significantly, Leibniz’s theory of freedom elaborated in the *Theodicy* was also the focus of heated discussion. Leibniz considers freedom to involve contingency (insofar as an act is not metaphysically necessary but possible in other worlds), intelligence (or a capacity to act according to a clear or distinct cognition of what is good), and spontaneity (or the fact that an action proceeds from causes internal to the agent rather than external). Wolff, in his own treatment of freedom late in the empirical psychology of the *German Metaphysics*, sets out from Leibniz’s discussion, though (consistent with this empirical context) he frames his account in straightforwardly psychological terms without invoking the contentious metaphysics behind Leibniz’s view. In any case, spontaneity constitutes the core of freedom for Wolff, and he accounts for it in typical compatibilist terms as amounting to the soul’s capacity to choose, among a set of alternatives, whatever pleases it most in accordance with its own internal motives.

Even in the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition itself there were a variety of positions canvassed on these, and other, topics, with some defending a natural influence, or genuine causal interaction between substances, and others seeking to distinguish between the soul’s spontaneity and its power of choice, properly understood. Yet, the most vehement and strategically effective opposition to Wolff came from his Pietist colleagues in Halle. This influential theological movement within the Lutheran tradition, which counts Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) and August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) among its founding figures, and which established a firm institutional foothold in the theology faculty at Halle, emphasized the cultivation of strict intellectual and moral discipline in order to make oneself ready for a spiritual rebirth and personal transformation bestowed through an act of divine grace. This naturally brought them into conflict with their high-profile colleague in the philosophy faculty, whose (qualified) endorsement of a pre-established order of states of the soul and consequent reduction of freedom to a mere spontaneity flew in the face of the Pietist emphasis on the efficacy of the human will and the urgency of our vocation to moral and spiritual improvement. This was not lost on Joachim Lange, Wolff’s most dogged Pietist opponent. He outlines a starkly contrasting philosophical perspective to Wolffian metaphysics in his *A Modest and Detailed Disclosure of the False and Harmful Philosophy in the Wolffian Metaphysical System* (1724), where he contends that Wolff denies the efficacy of the will in human action, argues that morality and religion require a capacity for genuinely free rather than merely spontaneous action, and cites the human conscience, among other things, as evidence of the reality of freedom, even if the use of that freedom is restrained by the fallen corruption of our intellect and will.

The immediate result of this controversy was Wolff’s removal from his university position and expulsion from Prussia by Friedrich Wilhelm I, who had personal connections with Francke and political interests in promoting Pietism. Yet, Wolff thrived with his new status as a martyr for the Enlightenment, taking up a position in Marburg, penning a Latin series of textbooks that gained him much wider Continental exposure, and collecting memberships in national learned societies and other honours. However, Wolff’s popularity and increasing influence on the German academic and intellectual scene, as well as the fact that the king would later think better of his precipitous verdict, galled his otherwise victorious Pietist detractors who continued their campaign against Wolff through the 1730s (with Wolff replying in-kind to each new broadside). Among Lange’s most persistent charges was that Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics, with its reliance on the principle of sufficient reason, its embrace of a thoroughgoing causal determinism, and consequent reduction of the human being to a sort of automaton, amounts to a partial but nonetheless pernicious form of Spinozism.

It was against the background of the controversy with the Pietists, and his interest in addressing the charge of Spinozism directly, that Wolff ultimately penned a full-dress refutation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* as part of his *Natural Theology* published in 1737. While in early 18th century Germany, as was the case throughout the rest of Western Europe, Spinoza’s name was synonymous with atheism, materialism, fatalism, and immorality, Spinoza’s thought itself, particularly as expressed in the *Ethics*, was not often directly engaged with by philosophers (one notable exception being in histories of atheism or heterodox thought). Indeed, Wolff’s critical treatment of Spinoza represents the first (published) discussion of Spinoza by a major philosopher since Pierre Bayle’s entry on the topic in the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* of 1697. In his own discussion, Wolff attempts to reply to Lange’s charge through illustrating that the foundational errors of Spinozism can only be remedied with the sort of rigorous ontology outlined in the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy. Yet, Wolff’s persistent refusal to criticise Spinoza for the alleged pernicious consequences of his views, or his immoral motives in propounding them, represents a charitable hermeneutics, nearly unprecedented in its application to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, that can be traced directly back to his treatment at the hands of Lange, who had made frequent use of this method in his attacks on Wolff (as is evident from *A Modest and Detailed Disclosure*). In addition to constituting Wolff’s final major salvo in the dispute with Pietists, his refutation of Spinoza is also significant in providing the last detailed presentation of the core of the Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics, as Wolff would devote his remaining intellectual efforts, after returning to Halle in 1740 at the invitation of the newly ascended Friedrich II, to practical philosophy.

4. The Limits of Reason

The ascendancy of the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy in the 1730s and 1740s would provoke further, and much more sophisticated challenges to its distinctive brand of philosophical rationalism. Wolff’s apparent reduction of freedom to a kind of spontaneity remained controversial, and it soon became clear to Wolff’s opponents that this conception of freedom in terms of a choice determined by internal motives was a direct outgrowth of the Leibnizian understanding of the meaning and scope of the principle of sufficient reason. Leibniz, like Spinoza, made liberal use of the principle in his metaphysics, including the *Theodicy* but particularly in the correspondence with Clarke where he included God’s free choice to make this world actual within its scope, and sought to vindicate the principle by showing that it had long been assumed by philosophers even if it had not been explicitly formulated. Wolff, whose metaphysics was deeply influenced by this correspondence (and who even penned the preface to the German edition of 1717), likewise extended the scope of the principle to the free actions of the human will, and even supplemented a perceived deficiency in Leibniz’s discussion by offering a demonstration of the principle itself.

Lange, of course, had taken issue with the application of the principle of sufficient to human actions, contending that it renders them necessary in a manner inconsistent with morality (but consistent with Stoicism and Spinozism). Yet, it was Christian August Crusius, a philosopher and theologian also situated within the Thomasian-Pietist tradition, who mounted the most sophisticated and comprehensive assault against the Leibnizian understanding and use of this principle in his *Philosophical Dissertation on the Use and Limits of the Principle of Determining Reason* of 1743. Like Lange, Crusius takes the Leibnizian usage of the principle to be destructive of morality, though Crusius goes further in exposing the ambiguities within the principle itself which help account for much of the disagreement between Leibniz and Clarke (despite the fact that both purport to accept it), as well as to expose the fallacies in Wolff’s alleged proofs. Rather than rejecting the principle altogether, however, Crusius defends a nuanced position, accepting the applicability of a sub-principle, which he calls the principle of *sufficient cause*, to all actions and events, while denying that the strongest version of the principle, which he dubs the principle of *determining reason*, also applies to the first actions of the human (or indeed the divine) will. Crusius’ *Dissertation* thus represents a decisive intervention in the active and ongoing debate concerning the principle of sufficient reason, and certainly raises a considerable, if frequently overlooked, challenge to the most ambitious formulations of philosophical rationalism.

Another wider-ranging, but complementary, challenge took up rationalist attempts to supply demonstrations for truths of faith. Wolff’s own efforts in this regard representation a continuation of a rationalist project stemming back to Descartes’s *Meditations*—in the letter to the Theological faculty at the Sorbonne that prefaces that work he emphasizes the continuity of his project with the injunction of the Lateran council under Pope Leo X in 1513 to demonstrate the existence of God and the recently declared dogma of the soul’s immortality. Whether Descartes succeeds in either of these, of course, is doubtful, but his thought nonetheless laid the foundations for later Cartesians, such as Poiret, to tackle other issues, including the problem of theodicy. The Socinians were likewise at the forefront of this debate, as were Le Clerc and Locke, with the last insisting that religious belief must remain subject to the canons of probable knowledge lest it devolve into mere enthusiasm. As might be expected, a more radical challenge was posed by Hobbes and, most notoriously, by Spinoza, who in his *Theological-Political Treatise* of 1670raised detailed objections to the authenticity of Scripture, on which the transmission of revelation relies. The non-rationalist camp by contrast, did not count a major philosopher among its ranks, with one exception being the lapsed Cartesian Pierre Daniel Huet (1630–1721), that is, not until Bayle, whose famed *Dictionary* and other works presented a comprehensive criticism of rational attempts to resolve the problem of evil, apparently leaving only recourse to faith for this and other Christian mysteries. It was, in fact, Bayle’s attack that prompted Leibniz to take up the cause of reason in his *Theodicy*, and to contend that there are truths that are no doubt *above* reason but, against Bayle, that are not and cannot be *contrary* to reason.

As might already be clear, the conflict between faith and reason was likewise a crucial debate within the early Modern German context. Stosch’s *Concord*, while billed as an attempt to broker a reconciliation between the two, in actuality mounts a formidable challenge to the independence of belief from the canons of reason, to the basis in Scripture and reason for the belief in the soul’s immortality, and to any possible vindication, rational or otherwise, for eternal punishment. Similarly, the conflicting claims of reason and faith lie at the root of the controversy between Wolff and his Pietist opponents, as Lange and others came to suspect that Wolff’s project was a mask for his deeper hostility towards the importance of revealed truth, signalled for instance in his intellectualist definition of God and idiosyncratic proof of God’s existence, his denial of a central role of grace in moral improvement, and his exclusion of any room for miracles in his fatalistic account of the connection of events. Crusius, naturally, takes up the cause for the Pietists, making room in his account of the understanding for genuine mysteries of reason and outlining his own view of how human freedom can be made consistent with divine foreknowledge.

However, the most intriguing contribution to the German discussion on this topic is on the part of a sympathetic colleague of Wolff’s, namely, Georg Friedrich Meier. In his *Thoughts on the State of the Soul after Death* of 1746, Meier offers a critical examination of the rationalist project of demonstrating the soul’s immortality, though in emphasizing the need to prove the continued existence of the substance and personhood of the soul, Meier evidently has a richer conception of what immortality involves than, for instance, Descartes. However, in contrast to Descartes, Meier is sceptical about any rational basis for certainty that the soul will survive the body’s death, and he provides a comprehensive rebuttal of the purported demonstrations of this claim. Even so, Meier’s position is nuanced in that, while he denies any demonstrative certainty of immortality, he contends that we are nonetheless justified in *believing* that the soul will survive after the death of the body, primarily due to the important role this assumption plays as a support for morality and religion. Despite his Wolffian leanings, then, Meier’s considered position on immortality, and his concession that even those who deny it can still attain virtue, bears more than a passing resemblance to Bayle’s views, even if Meier is careful to distinguish himself from (what he regarded as) the latter’s scepticism. That said, Meier’s denial of our rational certainty of immortality, along with his rejection of any demonstration of the eternality of punishment and his affirmation of the sufficiency of natural rewards and punishments for our actions, cannot help but put one in mind of Stosch’s controversial views, and the fact that Meier was never required to answer formally for these assertions points unmistakably to the new toleration of radical thinking, and the beginning of a new philosophical epoch, under Frederick the Great.

5. Selection and Presentation of the Texts

Concerning these topics, then, we can see that German thinkers active in the period between 1690 and 1750 make original and significant contributions to familiar discussions and debates within the broader early Modern context. Indeed, though I have not touched on them here, there are a number of other topics besides, such as the nature of consciousness and self-consciousness, the thinking matter debate, questions concerning the relation between the soul and body, the metaphysics of causality and the ground of the laws of nature, the challenge of idealism and the proper form of its refutation, not to mention issues relating to natural law, moral psychology and the legitimation of political authority, as well as other figures, including Malebranche and Isaac Newton among others, that are also productively discussed.

With respect to the texts selected for this volume, I have provided those which speak most originally and influentially to the four themes presented above which, I take it, amounts to a fairly broad sampling of some of the major issues in theoretical philosophy in the early Modern period. Recognizing the distinctive slant of most taught introductions of early Modern philosophy towards issues in metaphysics and epistemology, I have not devoted much attention to treatments of ethics or political philosophy, despite the numerous important contributions to these topics in the period (and as it happens there are a number of translations already available of key texts on these issues by thinkers in this period, which I will note in due course). Moreover, I have devoted, as is only appropriate, the most space to the major figures of the period (Thomasius, Wolff, Crusius, and Meier), but have sought to balance this with a generous selection of some of the less well-known thinkers. The selection from Erxleben is the lone (and a very worthy) text by a marginalized figure to appear in this volume, though the recent surge of interest on the part of scholars in women and racialized thinkers in the early Modern period will soon see additional resources made available, including a forthcoming collection of essays relating to the contributions of women, entitled *Woman and Philosophy in 18th Century Germany* (edited by Corey W. Dyck) and a translation (by Stephen Menn and Justin E. H. Smith) of the works of Anton Wilhelm Amo (ca. 1700–ca. 1759), the first African-born professor of philosophy in Germany. Beyond that, specialists might accuse me of a certain Brandenburg-Prussian bias in my selection, particularly evidenced by the many connections of the figures here represented to the university in Halle. While this cannot be denied, it is to be expected to some extent, given the university’s distinctly and, for a time, uniquely modern mandate, and it is in any case a natural reflection of the unusually high concentration of innovating faculty there as well as its unsurpassed influence on German thought in the early and mid-eighteenth century. In the end, my highest priority was to select those figures and texts I thought would best showcase German philosophy in the early Modern period as a far richer tradition than it is typically given credit for, and indeed as much more than either a mere footnote to Leibniz or but a step on the way to Kant.

Part I: Truth and Prejudice

Chapter One

Christian Thomasius (1655–1728)

Christian Thomasius was born on 1 January 1655 in Leipzig. His father, Jakob Thomasius, was a professor of rhetoric and moral philosophy at the university there, where he also served as the supervisor of Leibniz’s doctoral dissertation. As the son of a professor, Christian Thomasius was admitted as a student in 1669 (at the age of 14), receiving a *Magister artium* in 1672. In this same year, Thomasius was introduced to modern theories of natural law through the writings of Hugo Grotius and, especially, Samuel Pufendorf (1632–94), leading him to pursue a doctorate in jurisprudence at Frankfurt an der Oder, which he received in 1679. Thomasius soon returned to Leipzig where he worked as a private lawyer but also offered private lectures at the university in hopes of obtaining a position. However, Thomasius’ outspokenness and his heterodox intellectual commitments soon brought him into conflict with the local theologians who endorsed an inflexible orthodox Lutheranism. So, a dissertation of 1685, in which Thomasius contends that bigamy is not inconsistent with the natural law, provoked controversy as did his announcement in 1687 that he would hold a course of lectures in German (when the practice until then had been to lecture in Latin). In 1688, Thomasius started the journal *Monats-Gespräche* (*Monthly Conversations*), the first periodical published in German, in which he (as the sole author) discussed recent publications in philosophy, theology, and politics, but also frequently took the opportunity to denounce what he regarded as pedantry and unjustified deference to authority in contemporary scholarship. This, as well as a couple of books—one on natural law theory and the other attacking what he regarded as Aristotelian and Cartesian philosophical dogmas—earned Thomasius a number of enemies at the university, but he initially managed to avoid any serious political or personal consequences from these (and other) conflicts on the basis of his family’s connections to the Saxon court. This would change, however, in 1690 when Thomasius penned a tract defending the marriage of a Lutheran duke and the Reformed sister of the Elector of neighbouring Brandenburg, a rival to Saxony. Having lost the support of the court in Dresden, Thomasius was banned on 10 March 1690 from writing and lecturing.

Thomasius was not short of options, however. Partly through the mediation of Pufendorf himself at the court of the Elector of Brandenburg, Frederick III (later Frederick I of Prussia), he was invited to Halle where he would be among the founding faculty of the new university which was officially opened in 1694. He was joined there by August Hermann Francke (1663–1727), a leading Pietist theologian who had previously lived in Leipzig and whom Thomasius had also defended in 1689 against the voices of Lutheran orthodoxy. In 1691, Thomasius published the *Introduction to the Doctrine of Reason*, his first book published in Halle though all but the last chapter was written in Leipzig, and this was followed by a series of texts on logic, ethics, and psychology, all in German and in a style that made his ideas accessible to the widest possible audience. He could not avoid controversy for long, however, as a criticism of Francke’s educational program published in 1699 led to a break with him (repaired only in 1714), and Thomasius’ use of his lectures to extend his attack on his colleagues led to a royal rescript forbidding him from lecturing on theological topics. Thomasius continued to publish, with a dissertation on concubines in 1713 that once again proved controversial, though he adopted a lower profile after 1720, and did not play a significant role in the events leading to Christian Wolff’s expulsion from Halle in 1723. He died in Halle on 23 September 1728.

The *Introduction to the Doctrine of Reason* (subtitle: *in which the way is shown in an intelligible manner to distinguish the true, probable, and false from another and to discover new truths, all without syllogistics, for all reasonable people of whatever estate or gender they might be*) was based on Thomasius’ lectures on logic in Leipzig and was successful enough to be published in five editions before 1720. In it, Thomasius attempts in various respects to carve a middle way between Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Protestant school logics by providing an accessible account of judgment, reasoning, and discovery that avoids needless intricacies or detours into metaphysics or theology but which conforms to common sense and consistently places epistemic priority upon the senses. In this, Thomasius’s *Introduction* variously bears comparison to the work of E. W. von Tschirnhaus (even though his *Medicina mentis* was one of the targets of Thomasius’ earlier criticism) and Locke (with whose *Essay* Thomasius did not seem to have any direct acquaintance).

The following translation of Thomasius’ *Introduction* (the edition of 1691) includes selections from Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5–7, and 13. In the first chapter, Thomasius introduces his novel conception of *learnedness* which is distinguished from scholastic erudition through its practical orientation and its accessibility through the (suitably cultivated) natural light of reason. The second chapter argues for a role for logic in promoting this learnedness. In the third chapter, Thomasius lays out his theory of reason as well as his general (sensualist) theory of cognition. In the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters, Thomasius turns to the doctrine of truth, offering a division among the types of truth and falsehood, as well as an account of what he takes to be the first principle of truth and a common-sensical theory of demonstration grounded upon it. The thirteenth chapter turns to an analysis of the principal prejudices that are the sources of error.

Regarding the translation itself, I have opted to render ‘*Vernunftlehre*’ as ‘the doctrine of reason’ rather than as ‘logic’ throughout: while these amount to equivalent expressions for Thomasius (and others in the period), the fact that a number of his points draw on the component of *reason* (*Vernunft*) makes the former preferable despite its awkwardness. Also, reflecting the comparatively immature state of academic German in his day, Thomasius’ choice of terms is idiosyncratic and frequently inconsistent. When necessary I have consulted his earlier treatment in the *Introductio ad philosophiam aulicam* (Leipzig, 1688) for guidance on functionally equivalent Latinate terms. Similarly, I have not indulged Thomasius’ habit of overusing italicization (*Fettdruck*). All notes in the translation are my own.

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Chapter Two

Dorothea Christiane Erxleben (1715–62)

Dorothea Christiane Erxleben, née Leporin, was born on 13 November 1715 in Quedlinburg in the Harz mountains. Her father, Christian Polycarp Leporin, was a medical doctor who took an active interest in her education. From an early age she received instruction in Latin as well as in theology and the natural sciences, and frequently accompanied her father on house-calls. Her aptitude for the theory and practice of medicine engendered an ambition to stand for a degree from the medical faculty at the university in Halle, for which she was given special permission by the recently ascended Frederick II on 15 April 1741. Her matriculation was initially postponed due to a family crisis (involving her younger brother’s apparent desertion from the military while also pursuing medical studies at Halle). However, a further and protracted postponement of more than a decade followed upon the death of her cousin who left behind five children whose care she overtook, and whose widow, Johann Christian Erxleben, a pastor, she married in 1742. In the same year, Leporin (now Erxleben) published her first book, *Gründliche Untersuchung der Ursachen, die das weibliche Geschlecht vom Studiren abhalten* (*Rigorous Investigation of the Causes that obstruct the Female Sex from Study*), which according to her own report she had written four years previous as a set of notes recording her personal reflections on the topic.

Erxleben would eventually fulfil her ambition of obtaining a medical doctorate, albeit not necessarily under the circumstances she imagined. After the death of her father in 1747, she took over his medical practice, and while she was by all accounts an excellent practitioner, on 5 February 1753 a malicious complaint was lodged against her by three doctors in Quedlinburg, baselessly accusing her of quackery and of falsely laying claim to the title of doctor. The complaint issued in a public dispute, which the local magistrate brought to a conclusion by ordering Erxleben to stand for examination at Halle if she wanted to continue practicing medicine. Delayed temporarily by pregnancy and recovery, an application for promotion was finally filed on 6 January 1754, at which point Erxleben also submitted her dissertation, a Latin treatise that advocated against courses of treatment that prioritised a patient’s comfort over desirable outcomes (and which she later published in her own German translation). The dissertation was successfully defended during a two-hour examination (in Latin) on 6 May 1754 and the doctorate subsequently awarded, making Erxleben the first woman to receive a medical doctorate in Germany. Erxleben returned to her practice in Quedlinburg, and little is known of her activities in the time before her death on 13 June 1762.

The *Rigorous Investigation* is a systematic examination, and thorough rebuttal, of the variety of obstacles that have historically limited women’s access to education. The text is divided into two essays, with the first essay focusing on the various prejudices that interfere with this goal and identifying four main prejudices: that women are incapable of learning, that they have no advantage to expect from it, that learnedness is or would be misused by women, and that the only reason a woman would seek out education is to distinguish herself from her peers. The second essay considers further causes for this exclusion, including miserliness and laziness (particularly on the part of male guardians). Many of the arguments that Erxleben deploys throughout her text are not unfamiliar within the history of feminist thought—she was noticeably influenced for instance by the *Dissertation on the Aptitude of Girls* by Anna Maria von Schurman (1607–78)—nonetheless, Erxleben’s treatment is distinguished by its systematic character, its detail, and by its ingenious and strategic appropriation of contemporary philosophical resources, including the logical theory of Christian Thomasius, as the theoretical framework for her criticism.

Erxleben’s treatise enjoyed a positive reception in its own day, even being republished and (positively) reviewed in a pirated edition in her lifetime. Along with much other work by women intellectuals in 18th century Germany, however, it remains largely overlooked by historians of philosophy and even by historians of feminism. The text translated here consists of selections from Erxleben’s discussion of what she identifies as the first prejudice in the first essay of the *Rigorous Investigation*. All footnotes are my own.

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Part II: Radical Philosophy

Chapter Three

Friedrich Wilhelm Stosch (1648–1704)

Friedrich Wilhelm Stosch was born in Cleve on 25 December 1648. His father, a Reformed minister, was the senior chaplain in the court of Electoral Brandenburg. Stosch studied philosophy, theology, and medicine at the university in Frankfurt an der Oder, and among his most important professors was Theodor Craanen (1620–90), a noted Cartesian philosopher who had an appointment in the medical faculty. After university, Stosch embarked on an educational tour of France, Italy, and Holland, though who he met with is not known. When he was 30 years old, Stosch entered into the service of the Electoral court as the privy state secretary but only remained in the position until 1686, withdrawing for health reasons. Stosch devoted the next years to philosophical study and in 1692 his *Concordia rationis et fidei* (*Concord of Reason and Faith*), was anonymously published with a falsified place of publication. Stosch, seeking to avoid controversy, only had 100 copies printed which were not intended for public sale; unfortunately, copies were discovered for sale in Frankfurt an der Oder, and as a consequence nearly all of the copies of the book were seized and publicly burned. The controversial book ignited a fevered search for the author by the authorities, and Stosch was ultimately identified as the author late in 1693 or early in 1694. This led to his arrest and to the formation of a committee that included such luminaries as the political and legal philosopher Samuel Pufendorf and Pietist trailblazer Philipp Jakob Spener to preside over the proceedings against Stosch, which concluded with Stosch’s public retraction on 17 March 1694. In contrast with the fates of other outed radical thinkers, such as Theodor Ludwig Lau, Stosch’s reputation and career prospects did not seem to suffer any lasting damage; in fact, he was later appointed to the position of court councillor and even elevated to the nobility in 1701 (regaining a title that his family had once held). Stosch died on 20 August 1704 in Berlin.

While the title of Stosch’s text suggests he is aiming for a reconciliation of reason and faith, it soon becomes clear that the intended concord between the two will be achieved through the complete subordination of the latter to the former. Indeed, while on the surface Stosch’s *Concord* presents a bewildering mix of not-obviously consistent doctrines taken from Spinoza, Gassendi, Hobbes, and Jean Le Clerc, what brings these various borrowings together into a coherent whole is Stosch’s own Socinian-inspired intellectual program, one likely first encountered in the radical circles in which his father was involved. This is evident, for instance, in his efforts to deny the rational basis for natural immortality and his rejection of the reasonableness of eternal damnation. As becomes clear, Stosch’s argumentation in the service of this agenda ultimately brings him into conflict with Spinozistic doctrines as well as core Cartesian ones, such as the immateriality of the soul (or even its distinction from body). Despite its peculiarities, and its scarcity, the *Concord* became one of the most important and influential texts of the free-thinking movement in Germany.

In what follows, references to Descartes’ *Meditations* and the appended Objections and Replies are given to the edition of that work in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, edited and translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). References to Malebranche’s *The Search after Truth* are given according to the translation of that work by T. Lennon and P. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997). All footnotes are my own.

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Chapter Four

Theodor Ludwig Lau (1670–1740)

Theodor Ludwig Lau was born in Königsberg on 15 July 1670. His father was a professor of law at the Albertus-University in Königsberg, which Lau attended from 1685, studying philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence. He moved to the newly founded university in Halle for a further year of study in 1694 where he attended lectures by Christian Thomasius, among others. Beginning in 1695, Lau embarked upon a series of trips to centers of learning in Europe and England (where he met Newton, among others), returning to Germany in 1700 to take a position as a privy counsellor and cabinet director for the young Duke of Courland. The Duke’s early death in 1711 ushered in a long period of unemployment for Lau, though he apparently used this time to read widely, and ultimately published a number of treatises in 1717, including texts on politics and finance, in Frankfurt am Main where he had re-located in search of a new position. It was in this same year that Lau anonymously published his *Meditationes philosophicae de Deo, mundo et homine* (*Philosophical Meditations on God, the World, and the Human Being*). It was immediately denounced as atheistic by the local spiritual authorities, with all copies confiscated by the magistrate and subsequently burned. Under pressure from the authorities, Lau’s publisher gave up his name and Lau himself was imprisoned (during which imprisonment he reportedly attempted suicide) and then expelled from Frankfurt. He appealed to the juristic faculty in Halle regarding the appropriateness of his treatment at the hands of the magistrate in Frankfurt, but was rebuffed in a review written by Thomasius himself. Another anonymously published philosophical text, the *Meditationes, Theses, Dubia philosophico-theologica* (*Philosophical-Theological Meditations, Theses, and Doubts*) of 1719 was also badly received. His reputation in tatters, Lau had little chance of landing another position at court, and he supported himself through translation work and composing verses for special occasions. Alongside this, Lau began a doctorate in law at Erfurt which was awarded in 1725. This led to an opportunity in his hometown of Königsberg, where he was offered a chance to join the juristic faculty in a teaching position. However, a thesis he wrote in 1727 to fulfill the requirements of such a position was judged by the committee to contain “paradoxical opinions” and he was forbidden to publicly defend it. Lau’s authorship of the notorious *Philosophical Meditations* also soon came to light, and he was forced to issue a formal recantation of his views. Lau soon left Königsberg again, and appeared to have lived an itinerant life until he settled in Hamburg and Altona in 1736. There, he spent the last years of his life in poor mental and physical health, dying in February 1740.

In the span of four compact chapters, *Philosophical Meditations* covers issues ranging from metaphysics, natural theology, cosmology, physics, physiology, empirical psychology, ethics, and politics. The first chapter defends the immediately evident character of God’s existence, such that any formal demonstration is unnecessary, while denying that we can have any distinct ideas regarding the divine nature other than that it is necessarily one. Lau accordingly has recourse to metaphors in accounting for the relation of God to the individual and to the world, and his scepticism regarding our knowledge of God leads him to reject the authority of Scripture in its determination of the divine nature and the prescriptions of religion when it comes to the proper form of worship (though he also endorses the external accommodation of one’s practices to local customs). The second chapter offers a consideration of the world and its physical constituents. There, Lau denies that the world is created *ex nihilo* and asserts its pre-existence in God, though Lau also contends that the world can be allowed to come to be sensibly and in time while emphasizing the difference between this and the Biblical account of Creation, and he stresses that the sensible world depends upon God’s activity in conserving it and directing the motions within it. The third chapter turns to the human being, offering a broadly materialist account of its physiology, in accordance with which the soul or active principle is identified with blood, and the operation of the human intellect and will are identified with the actions of the blood in various organs of the body, which understanding of life also provides what Lau regards as a consoling perspective on death. The fourth and final chapter presents considerations relating to ethics and politics, offering among other things a defense of the superiority of the state of nature and an account on the basis of the theory of the temperaments of the origin of oppressive religious and political institutions.

Lau’s text was previously considered as belonging primarily to the reception of Spinoza in Germany, though recent research has drawn attention to its manifold borrowings not only from Spinoza but also from Hobbes, Locke, John Toland, Plotinus, Giordano Bruno and various minor figures in the radical philosophical and clandestine tradition. If there is a main influence on Lau’s thought, it would likely be, ironically enough, Christian Thomasius’ philosophical eclecticism which Thomasius championed in opposition to the ossifying authoritarianism of philosophical sects and schools (and which fact likely motivated Lau to appeal to him after his book was condemned). Like Stosch’s *Concord*, Lau’s *Philosophical Meditations* found its way into private collections of forbidden literature and was circulated in hand-written copies (due to the destruction of most of the published versions) among clandestine groups of freethinkers. The text continued to attract attention after Lau’s death, and was translated into French (a translation in which Frederick the Great apparently had a hand) and German. The following, complete translation is of the original Latin text of 1717, and all footnotes are my own.

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Part III: The Controversy between Wolff and the Pietists

Chapter Five

Christian Wolff (1679–1754)

Christian Wolff, the most important German philosopher between Leibniz and Kant, was born in Breslau (Wrocław) in Silesia (part of present-day Poland) on 24 January 1679. Wolff’s philosophical education begins during his time at the Maria-Magdalene-Gymansium, located in his hometown: while the rector of the school, Christian Gryphius (son of a famed Silesian poet), was an avowed enemy of philosophy, another teacher, Caspar Neumann (1648–1715) introduced Wolff to the Cartesian philosophy. Wolff departed Breslau in 1699 to take up university studies in mathematics (among other subjects) in Jena, leaving in 1702 to sit the *Magisterexamen* in Leipzig, where he also wrote his *Habilitationsthesis* in 1703 on universal practical philosophy, in which he treated moral philosophy according to the mathematical method. The thesis was examined by Otto Mencke (1644–1707), professor of morals and politics at Leipzig and the founder (in 1682) of the influential *Acta eruditorum*, the first academic journal in Germany. Wolff became an active contributor to the *Acta*, and he was charged with reviewing the latest English-language publications on science and philosophy. Mencke also sent Wolff’s thesis to Leibniz (apparently without Wolff’s knowledge), which led to a regular correspondence between the two that continued until Leibniz’s death in 1716. The lively intellectual climate in Leipzig evidently appealed to Wolff as he preferred to remain rather than take up offered positions elsewhere; however, in 1706 the city was occupied by the forces of the Swedish king Charles XII, prompting the students and professoriate to flee the city, and leading Wolff to accept a call to a position in Giessen. Yet, Wolff never took up this appointment—during a trip home before departing for Giessen, he took a detour through Halle, where he met with the rector of the recently-founded university and was quickly recruited to the vacant chair in mathematics, supported by Leibniz’s recommendation. His inaugural lecture was delivered in January of 1707.

Like his new colleague Thomasius, Wolff lectured and frequently published in German. As might be expected of a professor of mathematics, Wolff’s initial major publications during the Halle years include an introductory textbook for the mathematical sciences (in 1710) and an influential mathematical lexicon (in 1716). However, Wolff continued to pursue his interests in philosophy, particularly in psychology, natural theology, and logic, on which topics he also lectured. His famous series of German philosophical textbooks begins with his work on logic, the *Vernünfftige Gedancken von den Kräfften des menschlichen Verstandes* (*Rational Thoughts on the Powers of the Human Understanding*, or *German Logic*), published in 1713, followed by his ground-breaking treatment of metaphysics in the *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt, und der Seele, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (*Rational Thoughts concerning God, the World, and the Human Soul, and also all Things in general*) published in 1720. Wolff’s bold incursions into metaphysics, and particularly theology, not to mention his increasingly well-attended lectures, drew the ire of his Pietist colleagues in the theology faculty, who began a campaign with a series of publications taking aim at Wolff (directly or indirectly) and accusing him of atheism, fatalism, and Spinozism. Wolff responded in kind, but his rectoral address on 12 July 1721, in which he praised Confucian ethics as consistent with morality, galvanized his opponents who directly petitioned the king, Friedrich Wilhelm I, to intervene. The Pietists, merely seeking to restrict Wolff’s teaching and publishing activities, prevailed on the king with the argument that the pre-established harmony, endorsed by Wolff, entailed that deserting soldiers bore no responsibility for their actions. The militaristic Friedrich Wilhelm I was incensed by this alleged consequence and issued an edict in his own hand on 8 November 1723 stripping Wolff of his professorship and giving him 48 hours to leave Prussia on pain of death. Upon receiving the order, Wolff left Prussia by crossing the Saale river, where he paused to refund the fees paid by his students and began the search for a new academic position, ultimately taking up a professorship in Marburg where he was enthusiastically received by students.

Now enjoying the status of a martyr for the Enlightenment, Wolff began revisiting many of the themes in his previous German books in a series of Latin texts intended to broadcast his philosophical system to his new, pan-European audience. Friedrich Wilhelm I eventually thought better of his precipitous action against Wolff, as he later attempted to entice him back and lifted a prohibition against the teaching of Wolffian texts. However, Wolff remained in Marburg, collecting tributes and memberships in learned societies, until the ascension of Friedrich Wilhelm I’s son, Friedrich II. Wolff accepted the new king’s invitation of a professorship and vice-chancellorship at his previous institution in Halle and returned to the city on 6 December 1740 to take up his new position. Wolff continued to lecture and publish actively, with his later efforts devoted particularly to multi-volume works on the law of peoples, natural law, and ethics. He died in Halle on 9 April 1754.

Wolff’s *Rational Thoughts concerning God, the World, and the Human Soul* (commonly called the *German Metaphysics*) represents the first modern, systematic treatment of metaphysics in German. Wolff’s innovative spirit is already evident in the division of the topics of metaphysics: after a preliminary, Cartesian-inspired discussion of our certainty of our own existence, Wolff launches into a treatment of ontology (chapter 2), empirical psychology (chapter 3), cosmology (chapter 4), rational psychology (chapter 5), and natural theology (chapter 6), a division of topics that became canonical for later German metaphysical texts, including Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Moreover, within each division, Wolff stakes out positions that serve as the objects of extensive discussion in subsequent German thought (and especially of the texts included in the present volume). In the context of his ontology, Wolff provides, among other things, a proof of the principle of sufficient reason (§§30–1), an anti-Cartesian account of essence (§§33–8), and a Leibnizian definition of substance in terms of the possession of a power (§§114–16). In his treatment of psychology, Wolff extends the Leibnizian taxonomy of notions or concepts to thoughts (§§198–214), endorses Leibniz’s identification of freedom with spontaneity (§518), which he supplements with an account of the will and motives (cf. §§492–4, 496), and considers the limits of observation as applied to the ground of the agreement between changes in the soul and those in the body (§§ 527–39); in the rational continuation, Wolff argues that matter cannot think (§§738–41), offers an account of the soul’s essence (§§753–5), speculates concerning the ground of the observed agreement between soul and body (§§760–7), and provides a proof of the soul’s personal immortality (§§921–6). In his cosmology, Wolff considers the essence of the world and concludes that a contingent but nonetheless determined connection of events obtains within it (§§545–79), in addition to defending an agnosticism concerning the representative powers of the elements of nature (§§582–98); and in his natural theology, Wolff provides a definition of God that notably emphasizes His understanding rather than His will (§1069).

As is frequently noted, Wolff’s *German Metaphysics* was widely influential and saw numerous editions in Wolff’s own lifetime, but less often noted is the fact that Wolff continuously amended his text in response to recent criticisms or by incorporating the many innovations and contributions of his own students to his system. As an evolving text, it is therefore difficult to identify a canonical edition, but since many of the figures collected in the present volume would have worked from an earlier edition I have preferred here to offer a healthy selection of passages from the first edition (though I have sometimes referred to subsequent editions to clarify ambiguities and correct obvious typographical errors). As with Thomasius, Wolff’s German presents challenges given that the language was still relatively unestablished academically. Wolff was well-aware of this, of course, and for this reason he supplies an invaluable glossary as the first register of the *German Metaphysics* in which he provides the Latin originals of many of his German philosophical terms and neologisms. Accordingly, for some German terms (for instance, *Eigenschaft*, *vor sich bestehendes Ding*, and perhaps most controversially, *Willkühr*), I have looked to Wolff’s suggested Latin equivalents (*attributum*, *substantia*, and *spontaneitas*, respectively) for insight into the appropriate English renderings. All references to the *Logic* are to chapter and section of the second edition of Wolff’s *German Logic* (1719) (an early English translation of a later edition of which is listed below), and all footnotes are my own.

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Chapter Six

Joachim Lange (1670–1744)

Joachim Lange was born on 26 October 1670 in Gardelegen into a large family. When he was 15, the family home burned in a fire, leaving his father, a local councillor, in a dire financial situation which forced Lange into the care of his uncle until the time he left to attend *Gymnasium* in Quedlinburg. Emulating his beloved brother Nicolaus, Lange sought to become a parson, a desire that brought him in 1689 to the university in Leipzig where he came under the tutelage of the orientalist and Pietist theologian (and later founder of the famous Halle orphanage) August Hermann Francke. Upon Francke’s dismissal from his position in Leipzig, after a conflict with the orthodox Lutheran authorities, Lange followed him to Erfurt and then briefly to Halle, though Lange soon moved to Berlin (in 1693), working first as a tutor and teacher and then as rector of a *Gymnasium* (after a brief turn as a rector in Cöslin in present-day Poland). In this position, Lange lectured on classical languages (his most popular work, a Latin grammar, saw 26 editions in his lifetime) as well as philosophy, and it was during this second stint in Berlin that Lange wrote his first philosophical treatise, the *Medicina mentis* (*Medicine of the Mind*) of 1704.

In 1709, Lange was offered, and accepted, an appointment in the theology faculty in Halle (after having refused a similar offer in 1699, due to his contractual obligations). Lange engaged in various theological polemics, but it was his role as the spearhead of the Pietist campaign against Wolff in which he proved most consequential. In the year Lange arrived, Wolff had begun lecturing on philosophical topics, including metaphysics and natural theology, in which lectures Wolff frequently defended positions contrary to the Pietists (and increasingly attracted students from theology). Tensions continued to simmer as Wolff successfully promoted his own disciple for a university position over Lange’s son, the theology faculty’s preferred candidate. Finally, Wolff’s address in 1721 concluding his rectorship of the university before passing it to Lange prompted outrage on the part of the theology faculty, and led them to scrutinize Wolff’s philosophical texts (apparently on Christian Thomasius’ advice) for evidence of radical thinking.

After penning a set of remarks on behalf of the theological faculty intended for the Berlin court, Lange’s first public salvo was in his *Caussa Dei et religionis naturalis adversus atheismum* (*On Behalf of God and Natural Religion against Atheism*) in 1723 which attacked Wolff, albeit without naming him, in the guise of refuting Stoic and Spinozistic atheism and fatalism. Wolff complained about his mistreatment to the court while his Pietist opponents in turn appealed to have his right to hold lectures in philosophy revoked; however, it was Lange’s caricature of Wolff’s defense of the harmony as exculpating soldiers’ acts of desertion as necessitated, and evidently communicated to Friedrich Wilhelm I (the “soldier king”) in a letter from Francke, that turned the king against Wolff, resulting in the loss of his position and immediate exile from Prussia. Yet, this only marked the beginning of the voluminous exchange of texts between Wolff and Lange, and their respective allies, texts that include Lange’s *Bescheidene und Ausführliche Entdeckung der falschen und schädlichen Philosophie in dem Wolffianischen Systemate Metaphysico* (*A Modest and Detailed Disclosure of the False and Harmful Philosophy in the Wolffian Metaphysical System*) of 1724. After this early victory, Lange’s personal campaign against Wolff suffered a number of strategic setbacks as Wolffianism soon gained ascendancy in German academia and Wolff became a European *cause célèbre*, the influence of the Pietists waned in the Berlin court, and a royal commission finally exonerated Wolff in 1736, after which Friedrich Wilhelm I even sought (unsuccessfully) to entice Wolff back to Halle. Lange died in Halle on 7 May 1744.

Unsurprisingly, Lange’s philosophical positions are in service of his Pietist theological views. Lange had already, in 1704, developed a pessimistic outlook on the capacity of the human intellect, beset with limitations and a susceptibility to prejudice in its fallen state, to reliably cognize truth through its own powers, and outlined a method for healing the soul that includes cultivating self-awareness through the natural light and supplementing this with divine illumination attained through mental and spiritual discipline. For Lange, then, the Wolffian philosophy, with its intellectual hubris and metaphysical views that appear to undermine the efficacy of the human will and to rob it of any incentive to action, not to mention its deflationary conception of God as a pure intellect, could only have appeared as a systematic outgrowth and symptom of the illness diagnosed in the *Medicina mentis*.

This criticism of Wolff’s metaphysics, which is consistent among Lange’s voluminous polemics, is enacted particularly succinctly and effectively in the preparatory section of *A Modest and Detailed Disclosure*. The so-called “Protheory [*Protheorie*]” consists of a sequence of postulates and theorems that together represent the core of Pietisms’ theoretical philosophical commitments and proceeds to prove or defend these assertions in the face of the contrary Wolffian assertions. The first set of principles (1–7) provide a consideration of spirits, particularly the human being and God, attributing to them both an intellect and will, with the latter characterized by absolute freedom which is further taken to constitute the proper essence of the human soul. Lange also takes the opportunity to make the case that the soul possesses a capacity to move the body, with which it consequently stands in a natural union and so, contrary to the harmonists, naturally and directly influences it. The second set of principles (8–14) explores the consequences of this characterization of spirits for the connection of events in nature, arguing for a contingency of events on the basis of the human soul’s and God’s capacity for absolutely free action. This is contrasted with what Lange takes to be Wolff’s fatalism, grounded in the mechanical connection among natural events and the pre-ordained order of the soul’s own states. The last set of principles (15–24) argues that the consequence, intended or not, of the Wolffian denial of the genuine freedom of spirits and the contingency of nature, is (partial) Spinozism and atheism.

Lange’s criticism of Wolff, and his broader intellectual contributions, have not traditionally gained a sympathetic reception among historians of philosophy, a fact partially attributable to the polemical nature of many of his philosophical texts but also to the theological commitments that underlie his attack on Enlightenment thought. However, recent scholars have come to recognize the frequently insightful and trenchant character of many of Lange’s observations and arguments, and that his treatment offers essential context for later debates about, among other things, the antinomy of freedom and natural necessity. Moreover, Lange’s conception of philosophy as an *ancilla* or handmaiden to theology is hardly exceptional in the history of philosophy, nor can it be denied that Pietistic commitments are interwoven into some of the most important philosophical systems of subsequent 18th century German philosophy, including that of Crusius but also, arguably, Kant’s.

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*Systemate Metaphysico von Gott, der Welt, und dem Menschen; und insonderheit von der so genannten harmonia praestabilita des commercii zwischen Seel und Leib* [...] (Halle, 1724).

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*gehabten vielen und werthesten Zuhörer, von ihm selbst verfaßet* [...] (Halle, 1744).

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Chapter Seven

Christian Wolff’s *Refutation of Spinoza’s Ethics*

As was the case throughout Europe, Spinoza’s spectre haunted the intellectual debate in early Modern Germany, with the charge of ‘Spinozist’ serving as a catch-all for thinkers suspected of the least sympathies with materialist, atheistic, or fatalistic views. Indeed, thinkers as otherwise diverse as Lau and Wolff were at some point denounced as Spinozistic on account of the bare compatibility (real or apparent) of their views with those of the Dutch thinker. Despite this, there were few serious attempts on the part of philosophers to engage with Spinoza’s thought, especially with his *Ethics* which had been generally available since its publication in the *Opera posthuma* of 1677. Christian Thomasius provides a brief *précis* of Spinoza’s *Opera*, including a summary of the *Ethics*, in his own periodical, the *Monats-Gespäche* (*Monthly Conversations*)in 1688, which treatment was provoked by the publication of the *Medicina mentis* in 1687 by E. W. von Tschirnhaus, a Saxon nobleman and one of Spinoza’s intimates (with whom he shared an early draft of the *Ethics* and exchanged valuable correspondence on topics relating to it). In terms of critical remarks, however, Thomasius contents himself with the usual denunciations followed by a general endorsement of the refutation by Pierre Poiret (1646–1719) who charged Spinoza with deviating from the ordinary definitions of metaphysical terms. Yet the most detailed, and certainly the most infamous, treatment is found in Pierre Bayle’s entry “Spinoza” in the *Dictionary*. Although it is the lengthiest entry in the work, Bayle’s discussion of Spinoza remains focused on the initial propositions of Book I of the Ethics, and indeed is largely limited to exploring the paradoxes that he takes to follow from Spinoza’s “abominable hypothesis” of substance monism, with its allegedly disastrous implication that extension is an attribute of God, the sole substance.

It is, therefore, a circumstance of some significance that a major philosopher such as Wolff should take up the task of writing a full-dress refutation of Spinoza and accounting of his errors. That Wolff should turn to the topic in the first place is, of course, by way of responding to the accusation of (partial) Spinozism frequently levelled by Lange (in the foregoing text, for instance). Even so, and in spite of Wolff’s discussion of Spinoza in the context of exposing the errors of paganism, Epicureanism, and Manicheanism, his treatment is distinguished by the thorough familiarity with the *Ethics* that it evidences, and its consistent focus on Spinoza’s express views and arguments rather than simply trading in speculation about his real motives or the consequences of his views for traditional morality and religion. Spinoza thus enjoys a (relatively) charitable treatment at Wolff’s hands, though this is less surprising considering Lange’s decisively *un*charitable treatment of Wolff, but also considering Wolff’s own express admiration for Tschirnhaus. Early in his own intellectual career, Wolff met Tschirnhaus on at least one occasion, during which they discussed Spinoza’s philosophy and Tschirnhaus reportedly disabused Wolff of a widespread mischaracterization of Spinoza’s metaphysics (which mischaracterization is addressed in the note to the opening section of the *Refutation*).

Wolff’s *Refutation* is presented in §§671–716 of the second volume of the *Theologia naturalis* (*Natural Theology*) of 1737. In the initial set of sections (§§671–687), Wolff scrutinizes Spinoza’s definitions, particularly of God, substance, attribute, mode, and finite thing. Wolff finds a variety of faults with these definitions, and contrasts them with their proper definitions in the Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy. Wolff traces these errors to Spinoza’s failure to engage in a properly rigorous ontology, an exercise Spinoza evidently thought he could be excused from given his reliance on the Cartesian principle that to grasp a term or concept it suffices simply to have a clear and distinct perception (or conception) of it. Having uncovered the inadequacies of Spinoza’s initial principles, Wolff proceeds to show how these figure into Spinoza’s account of extension (§§688–93), doctrine of bodies (§§694–6), claims of the uniqueness and necessary existence of substance (§§697–706), and his faulty account of infinite thought as composed of an infinite number of finite thinking things (§§707–8). Finally, in the last sections (§§709–16), Wolff confirms the fatalistic, irreligious, and atheistic character of Spinozism and shows how these errors could have been avoided had Spinoza sought distinct notions of key ontological concepts.

Due to its rigour and sensitivity to Spinoza’s express views, Wolff’s *Refutation* enjoyed a largely positive reception and became a key point of reference in subsequent discussions of Spinoza by German thinkers (sympathetic and otherwise). In addition to being published by Wolff as part of the *Natural Theology*, the sections comprising the *Refutation* were later published separately in a German translation by Johann Lorenz Schmidt (1702–49) in 1744, along with the first German translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Significantly, it is in this edition that these sections are first designated (by Schmidt) as a self-standing ‘refutation [*Widerlegung*].’ Wolff was later praised for his treatment of Spinoza by no less than Moses Mendelssohn who in 1755 lauded Wolff for casting Spinozism in its proper light before setting about to refute it. Wolff’s *Refutation* also played a role in the famous pantheism controversy later in the 18th century, as F. H. Jacobi and G. E. Lessing were apparently in agreement that Wolff had failed to understand, and so to decisively refute, Spinoza, but Mendelssohn continued to defend Wolff’s criticism in his own refutation of Spinozism in his final philosophical work, *Morning Hours* (1785)*.*

The following translation is of Wolff’s original Latin text, and all footnotes are my own. In what follows, translations from Spinoza’s *Ethics* and other worksfollow those in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, edited and translated by E. Curley, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985 & 2016) and, as is standard scholarly practice, the *Ethics* is cited according to book (Roman numeral); definition (‘d’), axiom (‘ax’), proposition (‘p’) or appendix (‘app’), and corresponding number; followed by scholium (‘s’) or corollary (‘c’) and number when appropriate. Wolff’s references to his own texts are to the Latin editions of his metaphysical and logical writings, individually listed in the bibliography below, with references to the second part of the *Theologia naturalis* given simply by section number. Additionally, it should be noted that I have retained a couple of important Latin terms in the translation for which no English rendering was available or preferable: ‘*essentialia*’ which for Wolff denotes that set of determinations that makes up a being’s essence, and ‘*a-se-ity* [*aseitas*]’ (which would literally be rendered “being-from-itself-ness”).

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Part IV: The Limits of Reason

Chapter Eight

Christian August Crusius (1715–1775)

Christian August Crusius was born 10 June 1715 in Leuna, a town just south of Halle, the son of a parson and a parson’s daughter. Crusius attended *Gymnasium* in nearby Merseberg beginning in 1729, and in 1734 the university in Leipzig. There he studied a number of subjects, but was drawn particularly to theology and, through the lectures of the Thomasian thinker Adolph Friedrich Hoffmann (1707–41), to philosophy. Crusius attained his *Magister* in philosophy in 1737, habilitated in 1740 with a dissertation on the corruption of the human intellect, and went on to receive a baccalaureate in theology in 1742. Crusius nonetheless sought a position in the philosophy faculty, to qualify for which he defended two dissertations, the second being the *Dissertatio philosophica de usu et limitibus principii rationis determinantis, vulgo sufficientis* (*Philosophical Dissertation on the Use and Limits of the Principle of Determining Reason, commonly called the Principle of Sufficient Reason*) which was published in 1743. In 1744, Crusius became extraordinary professor of philosophy at the university in Leipzig. Crusius’ major philosophical works followed in quick succession, with his textbook on ethics (*Anweisung vernünftig zu Leben*, or *Guide to Rational Living*) published in 1744; his metaphysics textbook (*Entwurf der nothwendigen Vernunft-Wahrheiten* or *Sketch of the Necessary Truths of Reason*) in 1745; and a book on logic (*Weg zur Gewißheit und Zuverläßigkeit der menschlichen Erkenntniß* or *Path to the Certainty and Reliability of Human Cognition*) in 1747. A book on physics followed in 1749, after which Crusius shifted his attention to theology, accepting an ordinary professorship in the faculty in 1750. And while he did not publish any substantial (new) philosophical works for the rest of his career, he did not resign from his previous position and continued to lecture in philosophy. He died 18 October 1775.

Crusius is widely, and rightly, regarded as the most sophisticated philosopher within the “Thomasian-Pietistic” tradition. Like the thinkers in this tradition, Crusius harbours a pessimism, albeit one not as deep as Thomasius or Lange, concerning the power of the human intellect, particularly in speculative matters. Moreover, Crusius upholds a libertarian conception of the freedom of the human will, according to which freedom is understood to consist in the power to act otherwise or to refuse to act in the same circumstances. In light of these commitments, Crusius constructs a powerful and systematic rebuttal of the Wolffian philosophy, distinguishing between mathematical and philosophical method, rejecting the Wolffian prioritization of (necessary) essence to existence, defending the soul’s natural capacity to move the body (in contrast to the harmonist denial of such influence), designating the will as an equally fundamental power of the mind, and rejecting the Leibnizian identification of freedom with mere spontaneity.

In order to preserve what he considers the genuine freedom of the will, Crusius focuses his critical attention in his *Dissertation* on the rationalist dogma of the principle of sufficient reason. Crusius argues that the principle, as commonly understood, should be limited in the scope of its use precisely so as to exclude its application to the human will. Crusius begins by identifying and resolving ambiguities in the key terms in the principle, including ‘reason’ and ‘sufficient.’ Concerning the former he distinguishes between reasons of cognizing and reasons of being and proceeds to identify various species of these in turn (§§I, XVI, XXXIV–XXXIX), and concerning the latter he distinguishes between a reason that merely suffices for a state of affairs and one that determines that state of affairs as necessary such that it could not have been otherwise (§II). A *sufficient reason*, then, in its stronger, Leibnizian interpretation is understood as sufficient in this latter sense, which Crusius designates a *determining* reason. While Crusius accepts that the principle of determining reason applies to most sorts of actions and their effects, he argues that it cannot apply to the actions on the part of the human will which he dubs “free first actions” (§XXV), and he makes his case for this in two steps. First, Crusius offers what he terms an “indirect proof” of this conclusion (cf. §XLI) by arguing (along the lines of Lange) that the principle taken in its unlimited scope entails the absolute necessity of events, a Stoic fatalism, and undermines morality (§§IV–IX); further, Crusius contends that the only reason to think that the principle would apply to the acts of the will is that it is proven through the principle of contradiction which, however, Crusius contends has not been, and cannot be, done (§§X–XV). Crusius then offers his “direct proof” of the *possibility* of first actions by showing that at least God’s actions would count as such, as would the acts of the intellect (§§XXIII–XXIV), though he suggests that the reality of *free* first actions specifically can be confirmed directly through inner experience (§IX). This necessitates the limitation of the principle from application to such actions, since as free they cannot be such that the opposite would be impossible (§XXVI). This discussion gives way to a compact presentation of Crusius’ account of truth (§§XXVII–XXIX), which bears comparison to that presented by Thomasius in the *Introduction*, after which Crusius concludes with more general considerations relating to the Leibnizian principle, its limitation and origin, as well as the possibility of human and divine foreknowledge of free actions (§§XL–XLIX).

The *Philosophical Dissertation on the Use and Limits of the Principle of Determining Reason* was published in 1743 in Latin, with a German translation, including additional notes and an appendix by the translator (a student of Crusius’), following in 1744. Crusius’ Latin philosophical and theological dissertations were later collected and republished in a single volume in 1750, for which Crusius added a number of responses to objections to the *Dissertation*, in addition to some minor changes in the text itself (and a second edition of the German translation, incorporating Crusius’ new amendments, was published in 1766). This English translation follows the original Latin edition of the dissertation, though I have omitted a number of Crusius’ lengthier footnotes, and my own supplementary footnotes (and additions to Crusius’) are enclosed in square brackets.

In what follows, I have supplemented Crusius’ references to Leibniz’ works with the relevant page numbers in modern translations into English (provided in square brackets within Crusius’ footnotes). For the correspondence with Clarke, references are to G. W. Leibniz and Samuel Clarke, *Correspondence*, edited and translated by R. Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000) [cited as *ALC*.]; for the “Monadology,” references are to G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, edited and translated by R. Ariew and D. Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989) [cited as *AG*]; and for the *Theodicy* references are to page numbers in G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, edited by A. Farrer and translated by E.M. Huggard (New Haven: Yale UP, 1952) [cited as *H*]. Crusius also cites Wolff’s *Ontology* [cited as *Ont*.] (see Chapter Five, above), and Wolff’s *Rational Thoughts concerning God, the World, and the Human Soul and also all Things in general* is cited below as the *German Metaphysics* (and all relevant sections of this text are translated in the foregoing selection).

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Chapter Nine

Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–1777)

Georg Friedrich Meier was born on 29 March 1718 in Ammendorf, a village near Halle an der Saale. On account of his delicate constitution, he was educated at home until 1727 by his mother and father, a pastor. After this, Meier briefly attended the famous Pietist orphanage in Halle, though ill-health interrupted his studies, and from 1729–1736 he received instruction in mathematics, Latin, and physics at a school in the house of Christoph Semmler, a polymath and educational innovator. Around the same time, Meier matriculated at the university in Halle, and in 1735 he began attending lectures by, among others, Alexander Gottlieb and Sigmund Jacob Baumgarten, on topics including metaphysics, logic, natural law, and moral philosophy. Meier attained the *Magister philosophiae* in Easter 1739 and was awarded his habilitation in September of that same year on the basis of a disputation on mathematics. After Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s departure for a position in Frankfurt an der Oder in early 1740 (shortly before Wolff’s return to Halle), Meier took over his lectures, eventually becoming extraordinary professor of philosophy in 1746 (on Sigmund Jacob Baumgarten’s recommendation), and then ordinary professor in 1748. Meier acquired an excellent reputation through his numerous and varied publications as well as through his lectures which were consistently well-attended, with one notable exception. In 1754, during a royal visit to Halle, Meier was summoned to an audience with Frederick II during which the king personally ordered him to use Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* as a textbook for a *collegium*. In spite of his doubts about the book’s serviceability for the classroom, Meier complied with the order and thus taught the *Essay* for the first time in a German university, but only offered the course once on account of low enrollments. Meier was also heavily involved in the university, being elected twice to pro-rector (and in his first term in this office he was taken hostage for three days by occupying Austrian forces during the Seven Years War), and he taught and published actively until illness forced him to retire from lecturing in 1776. He died in Giebichenstein, near Halle, on 21 June 1777.

Meier’s philosophical works span a wide range of topics. He published textbooks in logic, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics, influential books on hermeneutics, the Christian religion, and natural right, as well as numerous shorter treatises and essays on topics of more popular interest. Meier’s views were influenced by Wolff but also and especially by his teachers and benefactors—the Baumgartens—with a number of his texts providing detailed expositions of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s thought in particular.

Even as part of the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition, however, Meier avoids falling into dogmatism and frequently adopts unorthodox positions relative to that school. This tendency is nowhere more evident than in his *Thoughts on the State of the Soul after Death* of 1746. In this text, Meier disputes the validity of any attempted demonstration of the soul’s survival after death and its retention of its higher intellectual powers. Meier takes issue with the distinctively modern assumption that the soul’s immortality follows directly from its simplicity, but also challenges the more sophisticated proofs offered by Wolff and his disciples. While Meier thus denies that mathematical certainty of the soul’s immortality is possible, he nonetheless contends that we can hold this to be true with a high degree of *moral* certainty, largely on account of its indisputable importance (if not indispensability) for morality and religion. Meier’s position is thus clearly a departure from the orthodoxy of the Leibnizian-Wolffian school, yet that Meier takes this moral certainty to have an ultimately rational basis rather than being grounded wholly in Scripture, for instance, also serves to distinguish him from others, like Bayle, who have issued similar challenges to the power of reason to demonstrate the truths of faith.

It will come as no surprise that Meier’s *Thoughts* was instantly controversial, leading some to suspect that a free-thinking agenda lay behind his rejection of any demonstrative certainty of immortality. His character became the subject of investigation by the *Obercuratorium* for Prussian universities, and it is likely that Meier would have been subject to censorship, or worse, had it not been for a highly-placed friend who intervened with the king on Meier’s behalf. Meier published a further text, the *Defense of his Thoughts on the State of the Soul after Death* (1748) in which he responds directly to a number of his critics, and even formulated a new argument for the soul’s immortality, in his *Proof that the Human Soul lives Eternally* (1751), though even in the opinion of many of his contemporaries Meier’s own later proof was not immune to the sorts of criticisms found in his original *Thoughts*.

The following translation is of the second edition of Meier’s *Thoughts* (of 1749), which edition does not differ materially from the first. In the cases of references to Pierre Bayle’s Dictionnaire historique et critique (first edition 1697; second edition 1702), I have supplied the corresponding volume and page number in *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, 5 vols., translated by P. Desmaizeaux (2nd edition, London: Knapton *et al.*., 1734; reprint, New York: Garland, 1984). For Meier’s occasional references to Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (first edition, Halle, 1739), I have supplied the section number of that text, and the reader can consult the recent English translation of that text listed in the bibliography below. All footnotes are my own.

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1. For ease of reference, I will refer to these lands simply as “Germany” in what follows. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)